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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RABAT 001495

SIPDIS

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FOR NEA FO, NEA/MAG, NEA/MEPI, DRL

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SUBJECT: KING NAMES ISTIQLAL PARTY HEAD EL FASSI NEW PRIME
MINISTER; COALITION TO COME

(C) Classified by Polcouns Craig Karp for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Local media report that King Mohammed VI
named Abbas El Fassi as the new Prime Minister on September
¶19. Abbas is the Secretary General and leader of the
"nationalist" Istiqlal Party, which won the most seats in
Parliamentary elections a fortnight ago. Abbas, as Minister
of State, was formally the number two person in the outgoing
government. He has been the target of much criticism
recently, and for a long time, questioning his competence,
energy, and integrity. In the end, the King apparently chose
to fulfill his repeated pledge to name a government which
reflected the results of the elections, consistent with the
behavior of a genuine constitutional monarch.

¶2. (C) Abbas will now jump into the intense political
jockeying, underway since the election, to assemble a
governing coalition. This could be a right wing
coalition--with or without the Islamist PJD, or as Abbas has
indicated he would, return the outgoing right-left coalition.
In any event, Abbas has long made it clear that he is the
King's man. The throne's power will not soon diminish. End
Summary.

A CHOICE OR A DECISION NOT TO CHOOSE?

¶3. (C) In several ways, Abbas El-Fassi had the inside track.
With 52 of 325 seats, his Istiqlal party will be the largest
political group in the new Parliament. Although it has less
than 20 percent of the seats, in Morocco's fragmented
political landscape it has a solid advantage over all
potential partners, other than the PJD. Istiqlal's success
belied the expectations of many, given the party's reputation
for sclerotic paralysis and sometimes shady dealings.

¶4. (C) Nonetheless, Abbas, as Minister of State, was the
ranking member in protocol of the outgoing government. He
also enjoys prestige as the longtime head of the leading
Istiqlal Party, Morocco's oldest, and as the son-in-law of
Allal El-Fassi, hero of Morocco's liberation struggle. Many
thought the King would not choose El-Fassi, who is saddled
with a reputation for mediocrity and limited political
vision. One local weekly highlighted its candidate coverage
with the title "anyone but Abbas."

¶5. (C) The choice of a new Prime Minister was apparently
weighed carefully by the Palace. The King received on

September 13 the leaders of each of the six parties which garnered 20 or more seats in parliament, the required threshold for a party to form a parliamentary bloc in the 325-seat Chamber of Deputies. (The six parties were the Istiqlal, the Islamist PJD (second place with 46 seats, but first in popular vote), Popular Movement (MP), the National Rally of Independents (RNI), the Union of Socialist Popular Forces (USFP) and the Constitutional Union (UC)).

¶6. (C) We heard rumors that the Palace also looked at some of the younger, well reputed politicians within the Istiqlal, but the party itself stuck with its leader and the younger members did not publicly challenge him. The press and many others have had a field day over the past fortnight speculating on the choice.

¶7. (C) Ultimately the decision on the Prime Minister was taken by the King alone. He may indeed have chosen not to make a choice, but, as he had repeatedly pledged, to rely on the decision of the voters. It is normal practice in a genuine constitutional monarchy, like Britain, Belgium or Spain for the monarch to ask the head of the leading party to form the government. In that way, it is a continuation in King's efforts to build a democratic structure, but the way it is done reinforces the notion of his continued grip on power.

Parties Jockey as Coalition Scenarios Emerge

¶8. (C) The new Moroccan Parliament will be seated on October 12. Intense consultations and jockeying among and within parties for membership in the governing coalitions has been

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underway since election day. This is likely now to get more specific, with discussion focusing on specific portfolios, and perhaps generally on platform. The "sovereign" portfolios, including Defense (which the King currently holds), Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Islamic Affairs will likely, as is customary, to remain reserved for personal nominees of the King. We would not rule out the presence of some technocratic nominees in these or other portfolios.

¶9. (C) In pre-nomination public comments, El Fassi indicated he preferred to return with the Koutla, or democratic bloc, which Istiqlal shares with the two leftist parties USFP and PPS. Meanwhile, the pro-Berber Popular Movement (MP) has moved to form parliamentary alliance with several small parties, creating what could be the largest parliamentary bloc (a total of 60 seats). The USFP, still reeling from its dismal performance at the polls, may return to the opposition. The PPS and the royalist RNI, for their part, have remained silent and will likely join whichever majority coalition emerges.

¶10. (C) The most likely scenarios for the next coalition appear to be:

-- A continuation of the current coalition of Istiqlal, USFP, PPS, (the Koutla) with the RNI, and the MP; or

-- The formation of conservative-right coalition composed of Istiqlal, the Islamist PJD, the MP, and the RNI, with the USFP and PPS returning to the opposition, forming a leftist bloc there. (The USFP/PPS and PJD leadership have mutually declared their incompatibility with the other.) or;

-- A conservative coalition without the PJD could be formed with the Constitutional Union (UC), an essentially non-ideological party which took 27 seats.

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